



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 635

[Docket No. 180117042-8884-02; RTID 0648-XB554]

Atlantic Highly Migratory Species; Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Fisheries

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Temporary rule; quota transfer.

SUMMARY: NMFS is transferring 9.5 metric tons (mt) of Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT) quota from the Reserve category and 20.2 mt from the Harpoon category to the General category for the remainder of the 2021 fishing year. The adjusted General category December subquota, Reserve category quota, and Harpoon category quota will be 39.1 mt, 2 mt, and 0 mt respectively. This action is intended to provide further opportunities for General category fishermen to participate in the December General category fishery, based on consideration of the regulatory determination criteria regarding inseason adjustments. This action would affect Atlantic Tunas General category (commercial) permitted vessels and Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Charter/Headboat permitted vessels with a commercial sale endorsement when fishing commercially for BFT.

DATES: Effective December 1, 2021, through December 31, 2021.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Atlantic HMS fisheries, including BFT fisheries, are managed under the authority of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act (ATCA; 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.*) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management

Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*). The 2006 Consolidated Atlantic HMS Fishery Management Plan (FMP) and its amendments are implemented by regulations at 50 CFR part 635. Section 635.27 divides the U.S. BFT quota recommended by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and as implemented by the United States among the various domestic fishing categories, per the allocations established in the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and its amendments. NMFS is required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to provide U.S. fishing vessels with a reasonable opportunity to harvest quotas under relevant international fishery agreements such as the ICCAT Convention, which is implemented domestically pursuant to ATCA.

The baseline General, Reserve, and Harpoon category quotas are 555.7 mt, 29.5 mt, and 46 mt respectively. The General category baseline subquota for the December time-period is 28.9 mt. On December 23, 2020, NMFS transferred 19.5 mt of BFT quota from the December 2021 subquota time-period to the January through March 2021 subquota time-period resulting in an adjusted subquota of 9.4 mt for the December 2021 time period (85 FR 83832, December 23, 2020).

To date for 2021, NMFS has published several actions that adjusted the Reserve and Harpoon category quotas (86 FR 8717, February 9, 2021; 86 FR 43420, August 9, 2021; 86 FR 51016, September 14, 2021; 86 FR 54659, October 4, 2021; 86 FR 54873, October 5, 2021). The current adjusted Reserve and Harpoon category quotas are 11.5 mt and 76 mt, respectively. Per § 635.27(a)(5), the Harpoon category fishery automatically closed for the year on November 15, 2021. At that time, 20.2 mt of the Harpoon category quota remained unharvested.

Quota Transfer

Under § 635.27(a)(9), NMFS has the authority to transfer quota among fishing categories or subcategories after considering determination criteria provided under § 635.27(a)(8). NMFS has considered all of the relevant determination criteria and their

applicability to this inseason quota transfer. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:

Regarding the usefulness of information obtained from catches in the particular category for biological sampling and monitoring of the status of the stock (§ 635.27(a)(8)(i)), biological samples collected from BFT landed by General category fishermen and provided by tuna dealers provide NMFS with valuable parts and data for ongoing scientific studies of BFT age and growth, migration, and reproductive status. Additional opportunity to land BFT in the General category would support the continued collection of a broad range of data for these studies and for stock monitoring purposes.

NMFS also considered the catches of the General category quota to date (including during the summer/fall and winter fisheries in the last several years) and the likelihood of closure of that segment of the fishery if no adjustment is made (§ 635.27(a)(8)(ii) and (ix)). To date, preliminary landings data indicate that the Harpoon category landed 55.8 mt of the 76 mt adjusted Harpoon category quota before closing. Transferring 20.2 mt from the Harpoon category to the December 2021 subquota time-period would result in 29.6 mt ($9.4 \text{ mt} + 20.2 \text{ mt} = 29.6 \text{ mt}$) being available to the General category in December, restoring the December subquota to roughly its base amount prior to the December 23, 2020 transfer (85 FR 83832). Without a quota transfer at this time, NMFS would likely need to close the General category fishery shortly after opening, and participants would have to stop BFT fishing activities while commercial-sized BFT remain available in the areas where General category permitted vessels operate at this time of year. Transferring 9.5 mt of quota from the Reserve category in this same action would provide limited additional opportunities to harvest the U.S. BFT quota while avoiding exceeding it, leave 2 mt ($11.5 \text{ mt} - 9.5 \text{ mt} = 2 \text{ mt}$) in the Reserve category to account for any BFT mortalities associated with research and/or any overharvests that

may occur in December, and result in a total of 39.1 mt ($29.6 \text{ mt} + 9.5 \text{ mt} = 39.1 \text{ mt}$)

being available for the General category December 2021 subquota time period.

Regarding the projected ability of the vessels fishing under the General category quota to harvest the additional amount of BFT quota transferred before the end of the fishing year (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iii)), NMFS considered General category landings over the last several years and landings to date this year. Landings are highly variable and depend on access to commercial-sized BFT and fishing conditions, among other factors, such as the restrictions that some dealers placed on their purchases of BFT from General category participants this year. Thus, this quota transfer would allow fishermen to take advantage of the availability of BFT on the fishing grounds and provide a reasonable opportunity to harvest available U.S. BFT quota.

NMFS also considered the estimated amounts by which quotas for other gear categories of the BFT fishery might be exceeded (§ 635.27(a)(8)(iv)) and the ability to account for all 2021 landings and dead discards. In the last several years, total U.S. BFT landings have been below the available U.S. quota such that the United States has carried forward the maximum amount of underharvest allowed by ICCAT from one year to the next. NMFS recently took such an action to carryover the allowable 127.3 mt of underharvest from 2020 to 2021 (86 FR 54659). NMFS will need to account for 2021 landings and dead discards within the adjusted U.S. quota, consistent with ICCAT recommendations, and anticipates having sufficient quota to do that.

NMFS also considered the effects of the adjustment on the BFT stock and the effects of the transfer on accomplishing the objectives of the FMP (§ 635.27(a)(8)(v) and (vi)). This transfer would be consistent with established quotas and subquotas, which are implemented consistent with ICCAT recommendations (established in Recommendation 17-06 and maintained in Recommendation 20-06), ATCA, and the objectives of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and amendments. In establishing these quotas and subquotas

and associated management measures, ICCAT and NMFS considered the best scientific information available, objectives for stock management and status, and effects on the stock. This quota transfer is in line with the established management measures and stock status determinations. Another principal consideration is the objective of providing opportunities to harvest the available General category quota without exceeding the annual quota, based on the objectives of the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and its amendments, including to achieve optimum yield on a continuing basis and to allow all permit categories a reasonable opportunity to harvest available BFT quota allocations (related to § 635.27(a)(8)(x)). Specific to the General category, this includes providing opportunities equitably across all time-periods.

Given these considerations, NMFS is transferring 9.5 mt of the available 11.5 mt of Reserve category quota, and 20.2 mt from the Harpoon category quota to the General category. Therefore, NMFS adjusts the General category December 2021 subquota to 39.1 mt, adjusts the Reserve category quota to 2 mt to account for any BFT mortalities associated with research, and adjusts the Harpoon category quota to 0 mt. The General category fishery will remain open until December 31, 2021, or until the adjusted General category quota is reached, whichever comes first.

Monitoring and Reporting

NMFS will continue to monitor the BFT fishery closely. Dealers are required to submit landing reports within 24 hours of a dealer receiving BFT. Late reporting by dealers compromises NMFS' ability to timely implement actions such as quota and retention limit adjustments, as well as closures, and may result in enforcement actions. Additionally, and separate from the dealer reporting requirement, General category and HMS Charter/Headboat vessel owners are required to report the catch of all BFT retained or discarded dead within 24 hours of the landing(s) or the end of each trip, by accessing

hmspermits.noaa.gov or by using the HMS Catch Reporting app or calling (888) 872-8862 (Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.).

Depending on the level of fishing effort and catch rates of BFT, NMFS may determine that additional adjustments (*e.g.*, quota adjustment, daily retention limit adjustment, or closure) are necessary to ensure available quota is not exceeded or to enhance scientific data collection from, and fishing opportunities in, all geographic areas. If needed, subsequent adjustments will be published in the **Federal Register**. In addition, fishermen may call the Atlantic Tunas Information Line at (978) 281-9260, or access *hmspermits.noaa.gov*, for updates on quota monitoring and inseason adjustments.

Classification

NMFS issues this action pursuant to section 305(d) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and regulations at 50 CFR part 635 and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

The Assistant Administrator for NMFS (AA) finds that it is impracticable and contrary to the public interest to provide prior notice of, and an opportunity for public comment on, this action for the following reasons:

The regulations implementing the 2006 Consolidated HMS FMP and its amendments provide for inseason retention limit adjustments to respond to the unpredictable nature of BFT availability on the fishing grounds, the migratory nature of this species, and the regional variations in the BFT fishery. Affording prior notice and opportunity for public comment to implement the quota transfer for the December 2021 time-period is contrary to the public interest as such a delay would likely fail to prevent the closure of the General category fishery when the baseline subquota for the December time-period is met and the need to re-open the fishery, with attendant costs to the fishery, including administrative costs and lost fishing opportunities. The delay would preclude the fishery from harvesting BFT that are available on the fishing grounds and that might

otherwise become unavailable during a delay. This action does not raise conservation and management concerns. Transferring quota from the Reserve and Harpoon categories to the General category does not affect the overall U.S. BFT quota, and the adjustment would have a minimal risk of exceeding the ICCAT-allocated quota. NMFS notes that the public had an opportunity to comment on the underlying rulemakings that established the U.S. BFT quota and the inseason adjustment criteria. Therefore, the AA finds good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(b)(B) to waive prior notice and the opportunity for public comment. For these reasons, there also is good cause under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) to waive the 30-day delay in effective date.

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 971 *et seq.* and 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: November 18, 2021.

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National Marine Fisheries Service.

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